DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 021 CS 210 224

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TITLE "Reading like a Regular Citizen": Professional Editors on Responding to Writing.
PUB DATE 22 Nov 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (76th, San Antonio, TX, November 21-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Editing; *Editors; Higher Education; *Professional Recognition; *Publications; Reading Instruction; *Reading Processes; Reading Skills; *Reading Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Editor Role

ABSTRACT

Teachers and their students can benefit from examining the role of professional editors and their response to writing. The editor's role lies primarily in giving service to the writer, the reader, the publishing house, and the power of the written word. Editors like Harold Ross and Max Perkins have evoked the trust of many writers by making sure that each author's ideas were accurately communicated in the text. Saxe Commins excelled at realizing the possibilities in each manuscript he encountered, while Harold Ross viewed his work as a collaborative activity with the author. Among others, Jonathan Galassi and Burroughs Mitchell have commented on editors' dual responsibilities to the writer and the publishing staff. How editors react to these dual pressures has a great impact on what eventually gets into print. Joyce Carol Oates excels in fostering and showcasing many writers' talents. Richard McGuire has asserted that the editor can best reconcile these various roles by simultaneously being faithful to one's own mind and to the mind of the text and, in essence, reading "like a regular citizen." Scott Berg's book "Max Perkins: Editor of Genius" provides an excellent example of this editorial approach. (JD)

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"READING LIKE A REGULAR CITIZEN":

PROFESSIONAL EDITORS ON RESPONDING TO WRITING

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Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English
Session C.18, "Composing and Reading Processes"
San Antonio, Texas--November 22, 1986

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"READING LIKE A REGULAR CITIZEN":
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Earlier this month (November 1986), there was an item in the New York Times citing a Texas voter who, when asked about his preference for governor, responded, "I guess I'll just decide between the evil of two lessers." My husband and I chuckled over that phrase, and we played with the idea of changing the title of this presentation to something like "The Evil of Two Lessers, or Why Writing Teachers and Editors Don't Need to Envy Each Other."

It might seem that composition teachers have lots of reasons to envy professional editors: the editors get paid to go out to lunch with writers who are interested in writing and who at least think they have something to say. On the other hand, despite the occasional glamor of the publishing world, editors face problems that most of us writing teachers don't have to bother with. The big difference is the commercial one: writing teachers don't have to worry about whether this student's essay is going to be a best-seller--or the occasion for a libel suit. We also don't have unknown people from all over the country sending us unsolicited manuscripts. And most of us don't get involved in the financial lives of the writers we work with. It's sobering and depressing to read the correspondence between, for instance, Scott Fitzgerald and his editor at Scribner's, Max Perkins, and to see how many of those letters and telegrams were concerned with money--sometimes money out of the editor's pocket.

But the parallels are nevertheless there: professional editors, like writing teachers, take home tons of manuscripts to read at night and over weekends; editors have to wade through as

much mediocre stuff as we do; editors complain about having no time to read anything beyond what their jobs require. And I haven't come across any testimonials from editors who believe that they're being overpaid.

So, whether it's a question of envy of not, there's no doubt that editors, like writing teachers, work intensely with words and with the people who write them. And it's helpful to see how people in a different but related field of work perceive themselves, because their perceptions may tell us something--not only about them but about us. It seems to me that looking at editors and hearing what they say about themselves helps us to think more clearly about who we are and what we do. It's a matter of seeing what's close at hand (namely, our work) by gazing off into the near distance (in this case, into the world of editing).

I should offer a brief clarification of terms before we go on. When I talk here about editing and editors, I'm not primarily concerned with copyediting, which involves editing a more or less finished text to ensure "correctness and consistency" in punctuation, spelling, and so on (George Stevens in Gross 112). Some copyediting takes place even in the early stages of writing, but the editors I'm talking about here are mostly concerned with the larger questions of focus, shape, length, etc. In fact, according to some editors, the detailed attention necessary to be a good copyeditor is often lacking in editors who excel at working with authors in the earlier phases of their work, and vice versa. (That's another difference between writing teachers and most editors: teachers are expected to be both guiding spirits

and copyeditors--though if we're wise, we don't try to perform both services at the same time.)

As I read letters, interviews, biographies, lectures, and essays, looking for what editors said about themselves, their work, and their relationship to authors, I found four main themes emerging. Over and over, editors kept talking in terms of service, power, delight, and encouragement. Those four themes intertwine with one another, and in the end, it seems to me that service is what an editor is all about--service to the writer, to the reader, to the publishing house, to the rightness of the text and the power of the written word.

It seems fairly obvious, to begin with, that the editor is at the service of the writer. In fact, as editor John Farrar points out (and what he says about publishers applies equally to editors), "The would-be writer is, of course, of first importance to the publisher. The writer can exist without the publisher; but this truth does not reverse itself. . . " (Henderson 72). That's why editors, like writing teachers, often think of themselves as midwives: the midwife may be indispensable in assisting with a healthy delivery, but the child was conceived and carried by someone else--and that child belongs to the parents, not the midwife.

Of course, once the manuscript has seen the light of day, the editor's role is probably just beginning. The goal, as editor George Stevens succinctly expresses it, is "to be sure that the author is actually saying what he intends to say, that he is achieving the effect he desires" (Gross 114). Editors do

this, first of all, by paying careful attention to what's actually in the manuscript. One anonymous editor speaks of herself as "an echo chamber or a camera eye," able to "record and see and feel only what [the author has] put on paper" (Gross 184). A particularly vivid image for this attentiveness comes from James Thurber's profile of The New Yorker's founding editor, Harold Ross: Ross "reminded me," Thurber writes, "of an army scout riding at the head of a troop of cavalry who suddenly raises his hand in a green and silent valley and says, 'Indians,' although to the ordinary eye and ear there is no faintest sign or sound of anything alarming" (Gross 249).

The editor who can read with this sort of attention is already rendering service to the author--first, by lending an intelligent ear, and secondly by evoking trust. Here again I think of Max Perkins. Burroughs Mitchell, who began to work at Scribner's just a year or so before Perkins died, recalls that Perkins "had the most remarkable eyes" and that "There was nothing judgmental in their steady look; it was calm, receptive, and curiously warming." And Malcolm Cowley quotes the owner of Perkins's favorite restaurant as saying that Mr. Perkins seemed to have been "vaccinated" with something that inspired mutual trust in people.

The editor who inspires confidence in both self and the writer has a basis for the major part of editorial service: working with the writer to realize the possibilities of the manuscript. One modest but memorable image in this regard comes from Saxe Commins of Random House. Saxe disliked the small talk of typical literary shindigs, and at one cocktail party when a

guest asked him if he was a writer, he replied, "No, I'm in the cleaning and repairing business" (99). A more elaborate vision of the editor as a cleaning-and-repairing person turns up in James Thurber's essay on Harold Ross:

> Having a manuscript under Ross's scrutiny was like putting your car in the hands of a skilled mechanic, not an automotive engineeer with a bachelor of science degree, but a guy who knows what makes a motor go, and sputter, and wheeze . . . a man with an ear for the faintest body squeak as well as the loudest engine rattle. . . . you realized that Ross was trying to make your Model T or old Stutz Bearcat into a Cadillac or Rolls-Royce (Gross 249).

The sensitive editor, though, doesn't transform a Model T into a Cadillac without the owner's approval. And even with approval, editing is far more of a collaborative activity than car repair is. The collaboration may take place through the mail, over the phone, or in live conferences, but it has to be there. Saxe Commins once prefaced a letter full of suggestions to a writer by saying that he was offering "a sort of agenda for our summit talks" (90).

Summit talks need to take place, not only between writer and editor, but also between editor and publishing staff. Thus Jonathan Galassi of Houghton Mifflin speaks of the editor as "a double agent": "With the writer," says Galassi, "the editor is collaborator, psychiatrist, confessor and amanuensis; in the publishing house he must be politician, diplomat, mediator" (Henderson 82). In the same vein, Burroughs Mitchell, describing

his work at Scribner's, notes that editors must "puzzle [their] way through a variety of duties, which have been unfavorably compared with the functions of a psychiatrist, and an errand boy, and a plantation overseer" (156-57). In an even more ironic image, David Ray, poet and editor of New Letters, speaks of the editor as a "footstool"; he quotes the lines from "Prufrock" about being "deferential, glad to be of use,/politic, cautious, and meticulous; . . . but a bit obtuse"--and then Ray tosses out the reminder, "An editor wrote that poem" (Henderson 263).

Quotations like those suggest the unsurprising notion that editors sometimes feel squeezed between their responsibilities to authors and their obligations to publishing houses. But being squeezed doesn't necessarily mean feeling powerless. On the contrary, it takes a certain kind of power to be able to serve, and a recognition of that power to serve gladly. First, there is the simple fact that the editor helps determine what gets into print and what does not. That's power. As David Ray observes, "One must, if assessing an editor honestly, wonder what talents he has crushed, not simply take his word for his enumerated glories as midwife" (Henderson 267).

But the editor has power not only to crush talents but to foster and showcase them. Rejoicing in that fact, Joyce Carol Oates speaks exultantly about editing the Ontario Review: An editor of a magazine, she says, "is a kind of god. He arranges everything." By choosing and juxtaposing material, the editor may suggest interpretations that no individual writer would have thought of. As a result, the magazine editor has created "a physical thing that [is also] a communal phenomenon. . . . A

symposium. A gathering. A party" (Henderson 145).

The editor, then, is at the service not only of the individual writer but also of the community of writers and thinkers; a stand-in for everyone who loves words and wants to see them used well. How does one reconcile all these constituencies? Richard McGuire in the little book Passionate Criticism has a phrase for it: being faithful to one's own mind, and simultaneously being faithful to the mind of the text. Editors must be avid, alert readers, open to the sheer delight of a good book. Once again, Max Perkins said it best:

> The trouble with reviewers, and with editors, is so simple that nobody gets it. They ought to just take a book and give themselves to it, and read it like a regular citizen and see whether they like it or not. They ought not to apply their standards and frames of reference, and all that, to it, until afterwards. But you cannot make them do it. It is something that only simple-minded people do perhaps. (Wheelock 248-49)

What Perkins calls the capacity to "read like a regular citizen" is, far from being simple-minded, the source of all the other qualifications of the editor. Because of their capacity to read and enjoy, editors have the power to stimulate more and better work. As George Stevens once wrote, "an editor's function is to make the author work harder and longer than the author originally intended" (115).

A prime instance of this function, successfully carried out, is Scott Berg's book Max Perkins: Editor of Genius. Speaking on

National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" back in 1979, Berg talks about his seven years of labor on that biography: "I had a portrait of Perkins over my desk," says Berg, "and every night, I'd loook up at that picture and ask Perkins, 'Did I give you an honest day's work?' If I didn't feel I had, I would work for another two or three hours."

Perkins himself had a hero to emulate--not an editor, though that was one of his hero's roles. Perkins said in an interview with Malcolm Cowley that "the man he would most like to resemble is Major General John Aaron Rawlins, whom Grant called 'the most nearly indispensable' officer on his staff. Rawlins' job was to keep Grant sober, reword his orders and dispatches (without changing their meaning), give advice when called for, and from time to time restore Grant's faith in himself." As Cowley observed, "More than once in his career, Perkins [did] all these things for an author" ("Unshaken Friend--II": 43).

One final tribute to the editor's power of stimulation appears in a New York Times eulogy for editor Henry Robbins, who died in 1979. According to John Leonard, who wrote the tribute, the great editors

> know how to enter a writer's silence and ask questions. They are perfect readers. In search of the perfect book, they nudge, blink, wheedle, sigh, expound, and publish you anyway. You know that they know that you could have done better, and so you try again. (Henderson vii)

That tribute sums up what I hope we can do for our students and they can do for one another. At the same time, the phrase

"perfect readers" carries an aura of saintliness which may be intimidating. The editors I've been reading about did work with a dedication and respect for writers that was thoroughly admirable. More interestingly, though, they had their oddities, their failures of vision; they were ordinary people, just like us. So, keeping in mind their skills and their shortcomings, we can learn from the great editors how to read like regular citizens. We and our students will be richer for that kind of reading.

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